

# Democracy's College, Episode 76

## Illinois SUCCESS: Leading with Hope

With guests Robert Brown and Sara Furr

**Sal Nudo:** Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in the P-20 educational pathways and is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at [occrll.illinois.edu](http://occrll.illinois.edu).

In 2022, Governor Pritzker signed a law requiring public community colleges and universities in Illinois to submit equity plans to the state, starting in 2024.

SUCCESS stands for [Supporting Universities and Colleges in Creating Equitable Student Success](#). These SUCCESS podcast episodes are intended to encourage and support higher education leaders to keep the momentum going, from planning, to implementation and learning, to improving and closing equity gaps in student success on their campuses. This series is part of a collaboration among OCCRL, the Illinois Board of Higher Education, and the Illinois Community College Board.

**OiYan Poon:** Welcome to the SUCCESS podcast! I'm your host, OiYan Poon. In this episode, we'll be discussing how higher education leaders can sustain their work to improve institutional performance in serving *all* students equitably, *even* when there are political threats hovering over the public mission of higher education. In short, how do we hold on to a critical sense of hope to sustain ourselves and our teams to keep doing the vital work for equitable student success?

I want to be clear that a practice of cultivating hope, even when things are hard, is not new. For example, this year is the, hard to believe, 25 years since 9-11 in 2001. And in 2001, I remember, was my first year as a student-affairs professional after my master's degree program. And I was responsible for coordinating an open-house event in the diversity office at George Mason University, just outside of Washington, D.C. And that orientation event, that open house event, was on 9-11, 2001. I remember as an early-career professional asking these same questions we're asking ourselves today on this podcast: How do we lead courageously and with hope when everything feels like it's pushing us out of doing mission-driven work and toward burnout?

I'm really excited to introduce our guests today and to have this conversation that is so, I think, on a lot of people's minds in higher education: doing work that is justice oriented and grounded in equity and diversity centered and student centered especially.

So, our two guests today: first is Dr. Robert Brown. He's the director of learning and organizational strategy at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and Integrated Marketing Communications. He partners with students, faculty, and staff to reimagine pedagogy, policy, and institutional practice. Previously, he served as Northwestern's inaugural director of Social Justice Education, leading campus-wide curricular and co-curricular initiatives. Dr. Brown also consults with organizations on identity-conscious supervision, leadership, and organizational change. His work emphasizes critical dialogue and reflective practice as tools for dismantling systems of oppression. Welcome, Rob.

**Robert Brown:** Thank you so much.

**OiYan Poon:** And we also have Dr. Sara Furr. She's a deeply values-driven leader, educator, founder, and CEO of [Mayari Coaching and Consulting](#). And her work is rooted in the belief that justice and belonging are not aspirational; they are necessary. She brings over two decades of experience helping individuals and organizations navigate complexity, reckon with systems of power, and co-create cultures grounded in equity, care, and accountability. Dr. Furr has led programs in residential life, multicultural affairs, and student conduct, and has taught courses at institutions across the country. Her scholarship and facilitation often focus on identity development, liberatory leadership, and strategies for preventing social justice fatigue. And I'm sure a lot of us out here are feeling that social justice fatigue in 2026. And we'll keep on doing this work that is *absolutely* necessary. Welcome, Dr. Furr! Sara.

**Sara Furr:** Thank you. Thank you so much. Glad to be here.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, excited to have you both here, illustrious equity champions here in the state of Illinois, Dr. Brown and Dr. Furr.

Sara, I think I want to get started with this really interesting concept that you developed: social justice fatigue, which you've explored in your research and your leadership. Can you explain what this is?

**Sara Furr:** Social justice fatigue reflects the physical, mental, emotional toll that working as agents of change within institutions of higher education creates. It is three existing frameworks to help us better understand social justice fatigue. One was racial battle fatigue. So, a lot of the folks who are doing change work hold marginalized identities, but beyond race. And so racial battle fatigue gave us that understanding about how just being a

person of color in the world creates fatigue, but there obviously are other marginalized identities: disabilities, LGBTQ identity, all of those pieces. So racial battle fatigue as a construct sort of helped inform how we understand social justice fatigue.

Compassion fatigue is largely known often in social work environments, but also any of those helping professions. Often that framework is associated with your occupation. And so that framework has existed a long time and helps us understand how doing work that creates change can create fatigue.

And then this notion of burnout, right? Everyone talks about burnout. I think the thing that's unique with burnout is that *key* identifier burner as hopelessness. And this notion that you can't go on, like, nothing can sort of keep you from going on, which also was not what I was experiencing when I thought about myself and/or professionals working in higher ed. Hopelessness was not something that I encountered very often. People felt fatigue, and people felt tired, and it was hard work. There was always still an element of hope there, so that didn't quite describe what I wanted to understand.

And so that's where all of these sort of overlapped and create this notion of social justice fatigue. They all present very similarly, but this understanding that there wasn't a hopelessness related to doing social justice work, at least not what I was experiencing with professionals in higher ed. But there was obviously the connection to occupation kind of forcing them to just do that work. And then there was always a connection to identity as well, given the work that folks were doing.

So that's sort of how I created the *construct* of social justice fatigue. *Much* more of my research focuses on wellness interventions and the way we mitigate fatigue, because it is not *will you* experience social justice fatigue, it's when and to what extent or what severity.

**OiYan Poon:** I mean, what you're saying is really resonating for me. I, you know, having had the chance to work with higher ed professionals across the state of Illinois in the last few years, folks are committed. It's important to them, the work that they're doing with students and around equity, but folks *are tired*.

I'm hearing what you're saying. There's this distinction between burnout, which we often just kind of mix in the conversation. And you're saying it's important to kind of make that distinction that people can feel *hopeful* and tired, but if you start losing that *hope*, *that's* when you start getting into the territory of *burnout*. So *you're* saying it's important to name these two things?

**Sara Furr:** Yeah. Because I think nuance is really important. Because sometimes we just oversimplify language and that helps us like find commonalities. As I was learning, this sense of hopelessness, it needs a different type of intervention, right? I mean, like that

often needs much more clinical intervention. There are probably other factors influencing that hopelessness. And I just think that it's important to, like, name things *accurately* because it allows us to actually then focus on the pieces that we need. Like, we think about intervention; it allows us to actually, like, put our energy towards the right places. And if you're really experiencing burnout, the things I talk about (laughs) around wellness interventions, they'll *help*. But you probably also need something else that is not necessarily, like, intentional movement and, you know, joyful activity. Like, I think that that's important. Naming things correctly allow us to also address them the best way.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. Yeah. And Robert, what do you think? Is there importance to naming things like this?

**Robert Brown:** Absolutely. And I really like this distinction that, you know, you can still be hopeful and engaged around this work, and it can still create quite a fatigue and burden in your practice.

When I reflect on this conversation, it reminds me of a really early point in my career. I was working at a university that *lacked* many of the resources that we've been trying to cultivate and develop through our work this year across the state. And, you know, what ended up occurring, you know, similar to Sara's research, is that much of the work of equity and inclusion and fostering belonging often landed on marginalized and minoritized faculty and staff on that campus. And as one of the few men of color on campus, I kind of followed in line (laughs) with that expectation, particularly as a young professional, not even fully thinking critically about the implications of that until there was a major incident that impacted the campus community, which spurred even *more* of my engagement and investment and students coming for support. And I found such a *deep* sense of purpose and meaning in that time, professionally, because the work felt so important and urgent and prescient.

*And* at the same time, what I had not realized or really taken into account was the toll that it was taking on me. And it wasn't until, you know, I was a very young professional, I think maybe 24, 25, my hair started falling out. I was having this –

**Sara Furr:** Yeah.

**Robert Brown:** ... physiological reaction that wasn't even registering cognitively at that time. Or even *emotionally*, I don't know that I was *fully* aware of what was going on in terms of how much I was holding this pressure to show up and to be the voice. And, you know, if I don't say anything, no one's going to say anything. Like, with so much of my internalization of the dynamics that were happening, you know, it became this *flag* for me. It's like the ways in which you're engaging are not sustainable. It's honestly one of the reasons why I

have (laughs) grown my hair out and kind of keep it long now. It's almost like a physical reminder –

**OiYan Poon:** Listeners! Rob has an *illustrious* head of hair (laughs).

**Robert Brown:** (Laughs) But it's this physical reminder when I look in the mirror of that journey and how important it is to kind of put on your mask first.

If you're going to be engaged in this kind of work, it is hard on the best days.

**Sara Furr:** Yep.

**Robert Brown:** And when you add in all of the social and political factors that we're navigating in our current moment, right, it just *layers on* the level of challenge. And if you're not engaging this work collectively in community, it can certainly be really isolating. And so, finding ways to be in community with other folks, to *name* the toll, the fatigue. *Even* in those moments of joy and pride, and, you know, we're reflecting on success, you *need* the release valve –

**OiYan Poon:** Mm-hmm.

**Robert Brown:** ... to acknowledge the weight of this work.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. There's a couple of things I'm hearing in what you're sharing, and thank you so much for sharing this with us today. You had mentioned that the campus you were working on didn't really have resources that were really needed. And I'm also hearing that something about being in the helper professions that some of us will feel like if I don't jump into this moment, if it's not me, then who will do this? And this concern of these challenges will *not* be addressed somehow if *I myself* am not throwing myself all in there.

So, two questions as a follow-up, and either of you can answer, of course. But what kind of resources do campuses need to support folks on our campus doing this important work? And what are some ways to be in community or not feel so *alone* and feel like you have to do this self-sacrifice?

**Robert Brown:** You know, I think about it across three different levels. You know, I think obviously everything starts with the self. What am I doing day in, day out? But also, like, how am I orienting myself to my work?

You know, I remember at certain points in my career, you know, I would look at my calendar for a given day. I would say, 'Okay, who am I *fighting* today?' It was almost like the armor I would place (laughs) around myself. And, you know, I knew I was going into some meetings, and there were going to be these *fight*s. I had to go fight and *fix* this thing or that thing. And there was a certain point where I was like, I don't know that that's a healthy way for me just

to even *orient* myself to this work. It created a certain level of *internalized* tension that was not necessarily sustainable for me. And so, kind of thinking about that initial level of self. How are you holding the work? How is it living in you, in your self-concept and how you engage and show up every day?

And then I think about it in a relational sense and interpersonally. How can I be reflective and almost do an audit of my relationships? Who am I spending time with? Small thing I do is almost, like, I color code my calendar. You know, there's just certain aspects of my work that give me joy, energy, life, are sustaining. And you know, everybody has parts of their job they just don't like (laughs). So, or people that are maybe a little harder to work with. And so, I have color codes for that work too (laughing in background). And I can look back at the end of a week, or look ahead, and say, ooh, this is a red week coming up (laughs). And I need to make sure I get some time with my family. I need to make sure I get sleep this week. I need to make sure I have some time to emotionally regulate. *Or* this is going to be a really joyous week and a really light week. And so maybe it's going to be a little bit easier for me to show up in that meeting. I do know that is going to be tough, but I've got so much good energy that's going to be swirling in me. So, the quality of my relationships and being reflective around that is really important.

You know, and then going back to that earlier story of being tough on systems and structures, you know, so much of what was going on with *me* personally was reflective of a lack of institutional resourcing that I was just taking on individually. But it was really a structural issue. We weren't resourced in appropriate ways to navigate some of the pressing issues in that campus. And so, as a leader *today*, when I hear, you know, my team or staff or faculty talk about a lack of wellness or feeling burnt out or that there's just too much going on, I try to think about that structurally and organizationally. How are we resourcing? How are we prioritizing? What do we need to be sunseting? And being critical about how much we're putting on people and what's really *most* important for us to sustain our work in ways that are aligned with our mission, our values, our key priorities.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, you're talking about kind of different interventions and different parts of your career. The story you started with was early career. Now you're in a different part of your career journey and you have a little bit more power or access to create different kinds of interventions.

Sara, do you want to add to that?

**Sara Furr:** I often think about what are organizations responsible for because self-care only goes so far. And we talk about this as if it's a self-care conversation; it really isn't. It's not

enough, right? It's not enough for me to put a facemask on. My skin looks great, but it's not enough. So –

**OiYan Poon:** And listeners, her skin does look amazing.

**Sara Furr:** Thank you. I think one of the pieces related is that I want organizations to be much more thoughtful and critical, *especially* now, about how they *embed* equity and justice work across the organization.

I've been an inaugural chief diversity and inclusion officer. I've been the inaugural diversity person at lots of places (laughs). And even in a position of power, nobody thought through what are the barriers that this person might face just in the culture of the organization? And how do we ensure that they are positioned in a way that allows them to actually do the job we hired them to do? Like, that is what I sort of hear from your story, Rob, is that like folks are hired to do these jobs on campuses and we're going to bring in people who are very passionate, sometimes people who hold the marginalized identity that they want to support students who have, right, like first-gen college students, low-income students, and then they're not even structured, positioned, resourced in a way to actually be successful in their work. And, sometimes even worse, they are successful in their work, and the institution's like, *wait*, we didn't want you to be *that* successful, right, because now we're facing internal resistance.

So, all of that needs to be considered. I think it is still needing to be considered, even places that *had* longstanding, like, diversity, equity, inclusion people or whatever words we're allowed to say now. And even as people reframe what their units are called: inclusion and impact, opportunity and belonging, whatever we're calling things, right? What does that really *mean*? And, like, get clear about how that responsibility and power is diffused across multiple units. I think that's how campuses can be successful during this, like, tumultuous time where it doesn't matter a word you use. If you're doing really good work, you're probably going to become a target. That is very key.

I also think that organizations from the, like, wellness lens and as institutions really need to be thoughtful about how do they create the conditions for everybody to access their own success in their wellness? What are the benefits that are being offered? Does your insurance plan require prior authorization for everything under the sun? Are people allowed to go to a doctor's appointment without taking their PTO. I have a role where I have to take a half-day. Like, that's the minimum I have to take. I can't just take an hour or two. So even though it might take me 30 minutes to, like, actually run across the street, go to the doctor, and come back, that I would have to take a whole half-day PTO. And PTO is so important for real. PTO, right? Out-of-office stuff.

**OiYan Poon:** Mm-hmm.

**Sara Furr:** And so these are some of the things that organizations, they can change and fix within their own power. Like, they don't have to worry about these (laughs) external pressures. And then it allows people to actually have and develop the *practices* that *they* might need for their own wellness. So many people are facing barriers just to define what that looks like for them.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, and as you were talking, for some reason around PTO, I'm like, I've worked in places where, yeah, I've got a million and one days of PTO, but there's like a unspoken culture of, like, shame (laughs) around taking PTO over something or like, oh, all the things that are gonna burden everyone else around you versus working at places where it's like the teams are so set up where like, great, I can't do that those days I'm taking PTO, but guess what? I've got not just one, but two or three other people who are going to kick in and be like, no big deal because we've got the team organizational structure in place –

**Sara Furr:** Exactly.

**OiYan Poon:** ... where we keep things going for each other. So there's just something about an unspoken organizational culture that I just wanted to pinpoint here and lift up as you were talking.

And I really appreciate you saying when you're doing good work, and this is the scary appreciation (laughs), right? When you're doing good work, you are going to be *targeted*. And I've seen people say, like, *great*, it's a great sign or (laughs), you know, indicator. Go us, right? But then it's like, oh, yeah, okay, *but* that's really scary. And there is a *storm* coming after you. So, what do you do to sustain through that category five kind of hurricane? Like, what do you do?

**Sara Furr:** One of the pieces, and this is related to my own research for me, is also, like, you stay ready so you don't have to get ready. And so what I learned through spending 30 days with seven professionals implementing different wellness interventions is that there are *three* behaviors that if you can implement into your *regular* life are going to have a dramatic impact, particularly on your *physical* wellness, but will absolutely impact your emotional and spiritual, intellectual wellness as well. And these three things can take less than one hour a day if you do them is 30 minutes of intentional movement. And that is movement as you want it to be as long as you intentionally decided, I'm going to go walk for five minutes. I might be walking around my building floor (laughs). Like, I might not even get outside. But it was an intentional decision, right? To move your body in whatever way feels good to you. It could be stretching, it could be throwing your arms up in the air and dancing, like anything.

Intentional movement makes a huge difference. Just 20 to 30 minutes, and it doesn't have to all happen at one time.

Ten minutes of what we call personal development. But it was really anything that sort of enriched your quality of life. So it could be reading a book. It could have been some folks played an instrument. So they would play an instrument. Some folks, they counted their Bible study or things of that nature. Like anything that *enriched* your own quality of life. Ten minutes of that daily—huge impact on your wellness.

And then 10 to 15 minutes of reflection practice. You didn't have to do that necessarily daily, but it was most impactful when people did this four to five days a week. And that reflection could be meditation, it could be writing, it could be voice notes. You could do it however you want to, but that actual reflection helped. You know, Rob, you were talking about pausing and even thinking about, like, is this sustainable for me? Or who am I spending my time with, right? It can be *anything* that allows you to, like, just pause and think about how was your day? How did you have to show up? Were there things you might change? Just spending that time had pretty dramatic effects on people's physical, mental, and emotional wellness.

So those are things that I just do every day. I just have a lot of those things (laughs) built in. They are kind of non-negotiable for me. One reason that absolutely, like, helps create this barrier for me to know that, like, I feel good and whole even if I get fired from a job. Like, I still feel good and whole. Like, I know that, like, I'm gonna be, we'll figure something out, right? As opposed to feeling as if, like, this work that I do, 'cause I think a lot of people in helping professions, as you said, OiYan, we feel called to do it, not only 'cause we were called to do it, but we're also *trained* to help. We've been *trained* (laughs) to show up in a specific way, but I think that, like, folks in helping professions also feel this, like, responsibility that is definitely beyond probably what they're getting paid to do. So I think that that is a huge piece.

**Robert Brown:** You know, I think about, like, what does the reflection, what does the daily movement, these sustaining practices, like, what does that then open up?

Just connecting back to our topic of, like, how do you find the hope? *Those* practices then free up the brain space, gives you enough of a window to even kind of open your eyes to notice things that can give you then *hope*, right?

Going on a walk is great for physical movement, but also you just can pay attention to the sound of birds, right? You can see the grandparent playing with their grandchild. You *notice* more *things* that can put life in context beyond the, like, hyper-intense bubble that maybe

you find yourself navigating at work. It's both of those are healthy behaviors, but they also kind of create these, like, pockets of windows for you to then be reflective.

One of my kind of go-to practices is reflection. I love reflection and think about it both personally and organizationally. And in those moments of reflection that I try to do what Adrienne Maree Brown talks about in *Emergent Strategy*. It's just like paying attention to the fractals, right? How do these small things kind of make a larger picture? And so, it's in kind of my own daily behavior.

You know, as we're getting right now to the end of year and doing, like, evaluations and end-of-year reports, and those things often feel like administrative burdens (laughs), if I'm being honest (laughter in background). And at the same time, they are an opportunity to look back both at accomplishments, things that have gone well, goals that have been met, and things, honestly, that, like, *weren't* achieved. And I think in that process of exploring failure or mistakes or just things that just didn't get done, there's so much learning in there, too. And as an educator at heart, I deeply believe in the power of learning, whether that's, like, learning from success or learning from, you know, we didn't staff this initiative well, and we didn't transfer information from this former employee to this new employee. You know, we could maybe think about more innovative ways to kind of get this communication directly to students. I wonder if there's a way that we could involve them in that process, right? *All of those* opportunities for reflection create learning that, for me, drives my sense of hope for the future of our work being more sustainable.

**Sara Furr:** Can I add to that? I love that question: What do these practices open up? And it made me think about how, OIYan, you asked this question: How do you find community? And those are also ways you find community. I live on the South Side of Chicago, and I know almost all my neighbors. And even if I don't know their names, because I'm just walking around my neighborhood, people know me, to the point that even when I'm not in my neighborhood, someone will say, hey, don't you live on 83rd Street? It has created community in my own living community, but I think the same happens on campuses. The same can happen is when you do these things and you then free up your time to maybe go to that staff lunch and learn, or you have time to go even just take a walk, you're going to start to see people who are maybe doing the same things or have the same interests, and then you find that community and build that community. Maybe you then have time to be part of an ERG or an affinity group, and then you're connecting with more people and you find those commonalities. I think that community can happen in those organic ways.

I wrote that question down when you said that, first of all (laughs), what do these practices open up for you? And I think that *community* is one of those things, because you also stop thinking about *time* as a thing where you have to constantly be producing or be productive.

That was another thing that was a common theme that we found is, like, days when people spent time with students, they *felt* the best. They, like, felt the gratitude. They felt *hopeful*. They felt joy. But they also felt bad about not being productive. And I think we have to do some of that reflection for ourselves. I'm like how are we defining what's productive, especially if you work on a college campus and your focus is students. How are we defining productive in our day-to-day?

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, I love this conversation around reflection and, like, people keep gratitude journals, for example. But it's also making me think about, Rob, what you were saying about doing that reflection on things on our campus too, right? So there's the personal but then there's the organizational, so there's different levels of reflection. And, you know, for those of you listening in Illinois and work at a public institution, you know that the state does require an annual equity plan and summary of work every year.

You mentioned also administrative burden. And I think in some ways that can be, like, yeah, especially I think a lot of our public institutions, it's like there's *so much* administrative burden. There's so much fatigue around, like, oh, here's *yet another report* we have to do. But what if we were to turn that around and be like, this is perhaps an opportunity for our *communities* or our organizational leaders to think through what were our goals in this last year or strategic planning-wise, two, three, five years? What are we learning from what we tried? How did things go? And learning especially from failure. I love that my kids elementary school, they keep coming home year in, year out, they're like, well, I failed, but here's what I learned. And I'm like, woo! This is a different generation (laughs) of public education where, like, there's no shame here in failing. It's actually, like, let's *learn* from this, right?

And then there's also, like, moments of, like, realization in that reflection. And this was a term I'm borrowing from you, Rob, from our pre-conversation: pockets of hope. Right? I'm like, oh, what an interesting pocket of hope. And then that just like *fuels* the work or *fuels* my energy.

I'm curious. I want to kind of transition towards, like, asking you both what kind of pockets of hope are you all seeing in the work that you do?

**Robert Brown:** Yeah, I think for me, being a part of this initiative and effort has been a pocket of hope for me. And it's one of the reasons why I love engaging with individuals working outside of my context. So, whether that's across the state or across the country. [I was] on a call earlier this week with colleagues who work all over the country, and it's so, like, helpful and grounding to just be in community with people who have maybe similar values, are trying to champion similar causes. In the process of reflection and sharing our

successes and things that are going well and, like, have you tried this practice or that practice, or *this* is working on this campus, you know, have you all considered it in this environment? That process of exchange *can be* so energizing in a way that *really* cultivates hope, where *I'm* not alone in this. There's a community of people who can work together to tackle these challenges.

Or even on the flip side, there's so much hope in, you know, the challenge that you're having, we're *also* seeing at 10 other campuses across the state. It's like, oh! This isn't just my personal failure or our own institution's shortcomings. There might be something happening systemic here. So, if you thought about it in that way—if we shifted the prism from which we were making sense this issue—that maybe opens up a *whole* other line of inquiry that we can then start to develop solutions that are *informed* by other contextual factors.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah. And then if it's like a statewide thing, as here in Illinois, I think the question becomes, well, what does Springfield need to do, right? Or, like, is there a state, you know, through the Community College Board or the [Illinois] Board of Higher Education, what kind of initiatives can we do to address these shared issues across the state?

**Robert Brown:** Yeah. And then how do we then organize around that? You know, people often conflate activism with organizing and don't necessarily understand that the two, organizing is so energizing. You know, ways of building collective power and influence. You know, there's a lot of work in that, but there is *so much hope* that gets driven just through that process. You know, I *always* love to kind of uplift and notice in these pockets of hope.

And then there's just the everyday ways where, you know, I had a younger staff member on my team come back and they're reflecting about an event that they did, and they were just so excited about it. You know, it went well and students loved it and they're engaged. And I'm so *glad* you're having this wonderful experience, but I was like, this feels so good for *me* just to see *you* experience joy and meaning in your work.

I know, like, *I* need that. You need that, right? And so just to be able to share, to celebrate success is so incredibly powerful. But we sometimes, like, don't notice those little conversations and how *needed* they are because we're, you know, to Sara's point, we're trapped in, like, the productivity spiral sometimes.

**OiYan Poon:** Sara, I mean, you know, just flip it, right? It's like pockets of hope are essentially burnout prevention, right?

**Sara Furr:** Yes.

**Robert Brown:** Yeah.

**Sara Furr:** Absolutely. I have some, like, specific things I've experienced just in the past week that I've been taking note of in preparation for today.

I had the opportunity to go to an early preview of the Obama Presidential Center and museum last Thursday, and I took a half day. I took the day off. I was very *present*. I was able to go with just a couple of folks and close friends. And, I mean, if we want to talk about hope (laughs)!

**OiYan Poon:** It's a whole *monument* (laughs) [of] hope!

**Sara Furr:** It's a *monument* of hope! So, I think that one of the things that, particularly, I used to work in the museum world, and one of the things that struck me, I mean, there's so many things that struck me, but the Presidential Center, OPC did an *amazing* job making the experience accessible across lots of different dynamics.

So, they have a lot of touchable items for anyone who might be visually impaired to actually, like, feel and have an understanding of how the hope poster felt, right? The different colors or different textures. They have not just captioning on all their videos, but they have sign language and interpreters in the corner and multiple, if it's a conversation between people, right? It's not just one. There are lots of places to actually sit, physically. It's just built into the building, right? There are the chairs that you can carry with you, fold out, sit. There are little plug-in things for any hearing impairment or whatnot for the video. You're not just relying on the speakers. You can actually plug in and hear right away.

And those things, I know they cost a *lot* having worked at a museum before, that most people only do the absolute bare minimum in order to be compliant. And it is very clear that they went above and beyond. I don't actually need any of those things. I don't even understand sign language, but I wanted to cry as I moved through the space and realized how *thoughtful* it had been for such a range of abilities. And I think it made me think of, like, compliance is always important, but how do we move beyond that and even prioritize accessibility in a different way?

I realized the other day that I shaved 2 minutes off my running pace. September of '25, I was running probably a 14:30 mile, and on Monday I went for a little short run, and I was running a 12:27 mile. I never thought I'd be running at that pace ever again, to be honest.

**OiYan Poon:** And that's what data can do, too.

**Sara Furr:** [laughs]

**OiYan Poon:** You track data and it's like, listen –

**Robert Brown:** Yep.

**OiYan Poon:** ... as a data block, I *love* this story.

**Sara Furr:** Right. I love it. Let me scroll back to my, what was I running last year? How did this improve?

**OiYan Poon:** And that, that's the practices we need to do in leading our institutions too, right?

**Sara Furr:** Exactly!

**OiYan Poon:** Look at the power data has.

**Sara Furr:** Exactly! Yeah. That gave me a lot of hope to keep running. I started hating running for a long time and now it's like, it feels joyful for me again. And then just having that little data point helped me a whole lot.

But I think another one that it tacks onto what you were talking about, Rob, is around, I talked to a lot of younger professionals who are just sort of getting their start in DEI work and then obviously feeling as if they need to leave immediately because of the (laughs) environment and attention. And what I have enjoyed the most about some of my conversations with folks is how people can stay focused and connected to their purpose, but also know that it's not who they are. And this ability to hold both of those things, I couldn't do that as a young professional. I didn't have any role models who showed me how. It just felt like my whole identity was my job. And I lived that way for I'd say at least 10 years until I started to, like, you know, liberate *myself* from that notion. And to see young people hold the both-and so early on just, like, gives me so much hope that we are, like, actually going to, like, dismantle some of these oppressive systems.

**OiYan Poon:** So healthy!

**Sara Furr:** Exactly! I wish I had that! I just didn't. That was not how I grew up (laughs).

**OiYan Poon:** Same.

**Sara Furr:** Yeah.

**OiYan Poon:** Thank you *so much* to Dr. Rob Brown and Dr. Sara Furr, two national equity champions in higher education. We're so lucky to have you here in Illinois. Thank you for sharing your insights and leadership wisdom on this episode of the SUCCESS podcast.

If listeners want to learn more, what are some resources you recommend and how might listeners reach out to you?

**Robert Brown:** I would say just [we] quickly reference[d] *Emergent Strategy* a little earlier in the conversation—highly recommend. I was also in a conversation recently thinking about love as a pedagogy. And I think there's a direct connection between love and hope. So I really love Dr. Durryle Brooks work on critical theory of love; encourage folks to check that out.

And then, selfishly, for folks who are wanting to think about some of these practices in the context of supervision and management, certainly encourage folks to check out [\*Identity-Conscious Supervision in Student Affairs\*](#). Elements of our model that –

**OiYan Poon:** Great book!

**Robert Brown:** ... talks about fostering wellness kind of at the team level and in our responsibilities as folks who manage and lead teams.

And then if you'd like to connect with me, LinkedIn is probably the best place to find me at this point. Most of the other socials have gotten weird, so (laughs) feel free to –

**OiYan Poon:** True story.

**Robert Brown:** ... connect there.

**OiYan Poon:** Thank you. Dr. Furr.

**Sara Furr:** Yeah, I would echo anything Adrienne Maree Brown has written or any recordings, anything is phenomenal and will really help transform how you think.

I have, like, I almost called them Bibles. I don't really want to call them Bibles, but it's like *Rules for Radicals*, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, like, these were just so transformational in my own awakening, I will say, or my own unlearning that I would *always* recommend that.

Get clear, like, are you experiencing burnout or are you feeling some differential fatigue? Because I think if you are experiencing burnout and you maybe don't have a therapist or whatnot, therapy is a regular practice for me, and I think it is so important. I mean, it just can be so clarifying.

And start practicing some of these pieces, some movement, some personal development that improves your quality of life and/or reflection. You don't have to do it all at once. Just do one thing. If it feels like a lot, just do one thing. Those are the things I would recommend to get started, like, right away.

And then if you want to get in touch with me, I also could be found on LinkedIn.

[Socialjusticefatigue.com](https://socialjusticefatigue.com) also has a lot of videos and resources related to my research and you can contact me through that. And then my own consulting practice,

mayariconsulting.com, also is a place where you can reach me. So, I'd love to help support anyone and just love talking about hope.

**OiYan Poon:** Yeah, and practicing, right?

**Sara Furr:** Yes.

**OiYan Poon:** So, I really appreciate you both for providing our listeners and community [with] really tangible resources and tangible steps. So, thank you again, and thank you all for listening to this episode.

**Sal Nudo:** Background music for this podcast is provided by Pixabay. Thank you for listening to Democracy's College and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all learners.